

## Mother Tongue in the Classroom Setting – A tool for Enhanced Second Language Acquisition in Multilingual Societies

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### Abstract

*The study has addressed the critical role of using the mother tongue in the classroom for enhanced development of the English language. Despite the recognition of the critical role of first language (L1) in second language development, there is no clear guidance on how and when to use it. Teachers in Kenya lack clear guidance on how to develop learners' mastery of the English language using learners' mother tongue. Mastery of the English language has been a challenge to most of the learners who learn it as a second language. This may be attributed to a lack of proper guidance on the implementation of the language policy in Kenyan schools. The current study was undertaken to establish practised translanguaging during English language lessons and its implication on English language development. This was achieved by establishing how teachers used their mother tongue during the English language lesson and its implication. The study was guided by Communicative Language Theory (CLT) which emphasizes the transactional and functional roles of the language. This theory guided the evaluation of how teachers of English used learners' mother tongue to teach English language concepts as well as interact with learners during the lessons. Three public primary schools in Kasarani Sub County in Nairobi County participated in the study. Audio-video recording supplemented by observation was the data collection method. Findings indicated that teachers used their mother tongue while explaining the meaning of words, paraphrasing sentences, and evaluating the understanding of a concept. Consequently, learners understood the concepts and improved their performance. However, teachers lacked clear guidance on how to use the mother tongue, which affects the positive impact of using the mother tongue. The study recommends that teachers be offered in-service courses on the effective use of translanguaging practice. The study adds knowledge of the existing theories on second language development.*

**Key words:** Mother tongue/first language/indigenous language, Translanguaging, Bilingualism/multilingual

### Introduction

The benefit reaped from mastery of the English language locally and globally has led to extensive research being conducted to establish how best it can be developed as a second language (Krashen 1985, Atkinson 1987, Cook 2008, Dornyei 2009). On one hand, Krashen believes that learners benefit when exposed to meaningful and comprehensible input in the target language. On the other hand, Dornyei (2009) believes that individuals who are to learn and hold a positive attitude towards the target language achieve higher proficiency levels. To Atkinson (1987), Mother tongue (MT) can be a valuable resource. The study was interested in the latter, specifically how the mother tongue can be a valuable resource in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in a bilingual country, like Kenya

### Bilingual Education

UNESCO (2003) refers to bilingual and multilingual education as to the use of two or more languages as a medium of instruction allowing the two types to be considered under the term bilingual education. Similarly, Matras (2009) describes bilingual education as a variety of education programmes where two or more languages are used to varying degrees. Although Matras agrees with UNESCO on the use of more than one language in education, he observes

that the degree of how each language is used may vary from one programme to another. The implication is that, in bilingual education, two or more languages are used to educate citizens of that country. The language(s) chosen may be the mother tongue, a regional or national language or an international language in education. Larsen-Freeman (2007) notes that there is confusion on what constitutes bilingualism and what does not - a discussion that the current study may not engage. But for this study, bilingual education refers to the use of two or more languages as a medium of instruction.

Baker (2011: 209-210), gives a broader perspective of bilingual education by highlighting its aims as:

- i) To assimilate individuals or groups into mainstream society to socialize people for full participation in the community;
- ii) To unify a multilingual society; bring unity to multi-ethnic, multi-tribal, or multi-national linguistic diversity state;
- iii) To enable people to communicate with the outside world;
- iv) To provide language skills which are marketable for obtaining employment and status;
- v) To deepen understanding of language and culture;
- vi) To preserve ethnic and religious identity;
- vii) To reconcile and mediate between different linguistic and political communities;

Baker's presentation on the aims of bilingual education underlines the advantages of adopting such an approach in education. These may have led to most countries in the world accepting bilingual education. It is, however, clear that the implementation of bilingual education has not had a clear direction as different countries take different approaches (Baker 2011).

Research identifies two main forms of bilingual education: Sequential and Simultaneous (Baker 2011 and Petrovic, 2010) Sequential may also be referred to as traditional bilingual adopted in programmes such as submersion, segregationist, transitional, and separatist. These programmes advocate for the use of one language at a time. Traditional bilingualism maintains that languages should always be separate in a bilingual environment to avoid contamination of languages which may affect a child's mental development (Jacobson & Faltis 1990) The sequential form of bilingual education advocates for monolingualism and use of target language as the medium of instruction. In such a situation, the native language is eliminated soonest possible to avoid its effects. Nevertheless, such bilingualism represents a weak form of education for bilingualism since it allows the development of certain languages and ignores others. For instance, in Kenya the teaching and use of local languages as a media of instruction is limited to lower primary. It is hoped that by the time the learners get to class four their English language is developed enough to allow them to be instructed in it.

In contrast, the simultaneous form of bilingual education allows a child to acquire two or more languages at the same time. Simultaneous form disagrees with the notion that first language interferes with second language development since all languages are guided by common principles across them. Simultaneous form of bilingual education is evident in programmes such as mainstream bilingual, maintenance/heritage language, and two-way/ dual language. Holmes (2013) argues that programmes that follow the simultaneous approach consider pupils' limited ability in the target language and how the native language can support the learning of the second language. As such, a simultaneous form of bilingual education argues

that a developed first language provides a foundation for second language learning since there is a positive transfer. Hence, it is referred to as a strong form of bilingualism and literacy as it advocates promotion of all languages in a country. The choice of the language to be used in any education of a country is enshrined in the language policy.

### **Language Policy in Kenya**

A fundamental concern of any relevant education system must therefore be the choice of language of instruction especially in a multilingual society such as Kenya. Therefore, the language choice at the entry level where the foundation for education is laid and also beyond school is crucial. This raises the question of how best primary school level education would be provided so that learners are equipped for the different roles in the society in a multilingual society.

Education in Kenya, like many parts of the world, takes place in a multilingual context. It has adopted a bilingual education as reflected in the Language policy. In Kenya, the policy recommends the use of either the mother tongue or the language of the catchment area (Kiswahili or English) at the lower primary level as a language of instruction. However, English should be used as the language of instruction at all other levels of education. This agrees with the recommendation to the use of mother tongue as one of the languages to safeguard minority languages from extinction, a national language to enhance unity in a country, and an international language to prepare learners to be global citizens (UNESCO 2003). The education policies not only safeguard the disappearance of indigenous languages but also enhance language development of national and official languages.

UNICEF and UNESCO recommend the use of the mother tongue in education. The term mother tongue is used in a variety of ways to describe the language that one learns first (primary or first language); the language one identifies with as a native speaker (native or indigenous language) or the language that one uses most. (UNESCO 2003). The study has used these terminologies interchangeably to refer to the mother tongue. UNICEF's (2016) research indicates that pupils learn better in their mother tongue as a prelude to and complement bilingual education approaches. In addition, UNESCO (2003) proposes mother tongue development and usage as a lingua franca in classrooms. The emphasis is that the mother tongue should not be substituted unless pupils do not use it before going to school. Most countries use indigenous languages in the early years of schooling. However, in some cases, the use of mother tongues has faced challenges, especially in areas where people from different ethnic backgrounds live together. For instance, in Kenya, most towns accommodate people from different linguistic backgrounds. As a result, the schools' population comprises learners who use different indigenous languages. The multi-ethnic situation in schools prompted the Kenyan government to pass a policy that Kiswahili be used as the first language in such areas in initial education. In so doing, learners' mother tongues in such places are ignored.

Similarly, Hakuta and Garcia (1989) support use of the indigenous languages in the early years of education. They argue that the first language development provides a foundation upon which the second language is built. Van Lier (2008) argues that people who advocate for the development of a new language along with the existing ones take an ecological approach to education. This approach disagrees with the notion that L1 interferes with second language (L2) development and puts emphasis on the positive transfer of knowledge. McLaughlin (1987) points out that all languages have common principles. First language usage during L2 classes allows the learner to move from one language to another systematically and procedurally. Vygotsky (1998) further postulates that students develop their English abilities on the condition that the content in English is above their current knowledge. It implies that it is upon the learners' first language rules that the second language rules are built. In Kenya, learners'

knowledge of their local languages is expected to form a foundation for the development of the other target languages.

It is therefore clear that although there are conflicting policies on bilingual education implementation in Kenya and beyond, the important role of L1 in L2 development cannot be ignored. Translanguaging has been proposed as one of the practices that can enhance language development. Hence the following discussion will endeavour to bring out how teachers use L1 to develop L2 in learners during English language lessons.

### **Translanguaging Practice**

Translanguaging has been evolving since its first use by William in 1994 as cited in Baker (2011). William used translanguaging to refer to a pedagogical practice that was used in a bilingual Welsh/English classroom where students switched between the languages for productive use. Similarly, Wei (2018) stated that translanguaging is applied in wider discourse including daily social interaction, visual arts, music, and linguistic landscape. This agrees with (Garcia 2009) who describes translanguaging as the use of two or more language varieties in a flexible way to make sense of their lives. Researchers agree that translanguaging is not only the discourse practice of bilinguals, but also effective pedagogical practices that utilize bilingual students' entire linguistic repertoire to teach content and develop language in various settings (Lewis, Jones & Baker 2012, Garcia, & Lin 2014). The study endeavoured to find out its use at lower primary level.

The official status of the English language has implications for language policy in Kenya. The government of Kenya requires learners to be taught the English language as a subject from the lower primary to the secondary level. It is also used as a medium of instruction from upper primary to the University level. In addition, those who want to pursue some courses are required to have performed well in English as a subject. The benefits reaped by those who excel in the English language, create a need on how learners' English language can be developed. However, as Kobia (2006) notes the government of Kenya lacks a definite and explicit policy implementation. The question of how learners, who start education equipped with only first language, transition from home language to English language is what linguists try to answer.

Translanguaging has been proposed as one of the practices since it acts as a bridge language between the first and second language, permitting a constructive transfer (Garcia & Lin 2014). This bridging of two language systems is strategically done to allow what is learned in one language to be practiced and internalized in another. Therefore, the learner can transfer language and literacy skills from the target language back to the native language and vice versa (Lewis, Jones & Baker 2012). Language proficiency of both the target language and the native language is enhanced which should be the reason for learning a new language. Wei (2018) opines that translanguaging allows learners to become bilingual as learners' L1 is not neglected in the process of L2 development. Marrero-Colon (2014) argues that translanguaging may be used for mastery of content, and transition from home language dependency to English language proficiency.

The diverse use of translanguaging creates a need to understand the practice. The current study implored how teachers use available languages in bilingual classes to facilitate a more effective way of learning content and language.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Communicative language Theory (CLT) has two different perspectives: communication competence and social cognitive view. The two are achieved by the creation of an interactive classroom environment in which the teacher meets the learner's communicative needs (Butler, 2011) CLT is founded on the Communicative method that views language as a way of

expressing meaning to develop learners' ability to use language to express themselves. The approach proposes that language teaching should focus on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures. In support of this argument, Brown & Yule (1983) identify two main purposes of language: transactional function, where language is used to exchange information, and interactional where language is used to establish relationships. Communicative language teaching emphasizes learners' acquiring a second language for interactional and transactional functions. Richard and Theodore (2014) note that such an approach focuses on fluency development that would enable a learner to engage in discussion on different topics.

Further, Savignon (2005) notes that although this approach encourages learners to use the target language as much as possible, it also allows reversion to local languages for an element that they could not produce in the target language. As such, the approach allows a learner to pick language through negotiation of meaning with the peer. The view of the theory that language should be used to help people communicate formed the basis for discussion on the use of L1 during English Language lessons.

### **Research Methodology**

The study was carried out in Kasarani Sub County in Nairobi, Kenya. Non-probability sampling was used to select the area of study. Grove, Burns and Gray (2012) note that in non-probability sampling a researcher uses their judgement to select subjects to be included in their study based on their knowledge of the phenomenon. The focus of the study was on multilingual classrooms; therefore, the choice of the place of study was determined by its plurilingual nature. Data for this research were from teachers and learners who use more than one language during English language lessons.

Stratified sampling was used to select three primary schools in Kasarani from each of the categories that included: the slum (low income), middle (low middle income), and upper classes (middle income). Therefore, three public schools were selected. Mackey, Gass & Margolis (2006) note that in research a participant may be allowed to comment on their activities through a verbal report. The use of the same teachers enabled the researcher to get some clarification for observations made during English language lessons. Clarification is important in case of contradictions in information and observations which were made during data collection. For instance, some teachers were observed to use Kiswahili during English language lessons but when asked whether mother tongue may be used they were reluctant to recommend its use. It was through interviewing teachers that the researcher got explanations. Similarly, some teachers never used their mother tongue at all during the lesson but were of the view it was helpful when used.

The study employed audio-video recording as the main tool of data collection which was supplemented by observation notes, The use of different tools is supported by Silverman (2011) who argues that the use of multi-methods gives different perspectives of the issue being investigated. The multiple data-gathering methods helped the researcher in triangulating the evidence. The following is a discussion of the findings from the audio-video recording and observation notes.

### **Result and Discussions of the Findings**

The study interrogated the use of translanguaging practice during an English language lesson where the language of the catchment area is Kiswahili. Using Communicative language theory, the study was undertaken to establish ways teachers used the Kiswahili language during the English language lesson and also find out whether the use of Kiswahili during English language lesson influenced learners understanding of concepts.

### Translanguaging Practice during English Language Lesson and its Implication

Fairclough (2001) posits that discourse allows a critical analysis of language at a social level and the impact it has on relationships. The implication is that any information in the dialogue has possible effects or functions. Since Wei (2018) identifies translanguaging as a discourse strategy, to achieve certain interactions at specific points during a conversation. The following is a discussion of how teachers used learners' first language (Kiswahili language) to improve their competence in the English language and also for creating a good environment for interaction. Communicative language theory's main goal is for learners to attain communicative competence (Spada 2007). Therefore, learners have to be exposed to concepts in the target language which they will use to communicate. Teachers exposed learners to the vocabulary and grammar of the English language. Since the study was in the lower classes where learners were still developing the target language, teachers resulted to use of learners' first language to explain these concepts. Vocabulary is key in expressing meaning in any language.

The study observed that teachers used Kiswahili language to explain new words. Jingxia (2010) posits that one of the major problems that teachers encounter in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom is how to convey the meanings of L2 to a learner. Cook (2008) suggests that referring to the learners' language is an important practice that can be used to explain. The teacher may use L1 to give a translation of a word or a synonym and even contextualize the word. This was done through a translation of an English word into the Kiswahili language or by replacing a word with its equivalent. Khokhlova (2014) correctly observes that teaching abstract nouns can be challenging as most of the words are vague. This helps learners get away with the obstacle of either not understanding a word or having a misconception. For instance, in one of the classes the teacher was supposed to explain to learners the meaning of the word 'have'. The teacher's quest to get the meaning of the word from the learners was unfruitful. The silence observed was interpreted as a sign that learners did not know the meaning. After the teacher explained the meaning of the term 'have' in Kiswahili language '*kuwa na*' language, the learners lifted their hands to illustrate they understood the word's meaning. Further, the learners were observed to construct sentences using the primary verb 'have' which is an indication that they understood the meaning of that particular terminology. Atkinson (1993) notes that translation of a word into the learners' language enables them to understand the new information.

Further, to reinforce the understanding of a new word, the first language was used to repeat a word. Teachers were observed to repeat a word in the Kiswahili language. For instance, a teacher used Kiswahili to explain to the whole class the meaning of the word 'champion'. The teacher further asked the learners to repeat what she had said in Kiswahili before asking them to identify the champion in the story. The teacher repeated the word in the learners' language to stress the meaning of the word 'champion'. Sert (2005) points out that the use of such repetitions is good in emphasizing what the learners have discussed. Celik (2008) also argues that a paraphrase of a concept or a word helps in clarifying the meaning. The teacher used a different language to emphasize and make sure that the learners had gotten the meaning of the word 'champion' correctly. The use of L1 facilitated the connection between learners' knowledge and the target language (Macaro, 2001). In addition, Ellis (1994) posits that a teacher may modify his or her language to make pupils understand the meaning of new words or make the input comprehensible.

As indicated before, understanding the grammatical concepts of the target language is critical to learners. Wharton (2007) observes that the use of L1 to explain grammar usage goes far beyond the single word or short phrase translation into an extended explanation by the teacher. This was observed in one of the classes the teacher was teaching the progressive aspect of the English language. The teacher translated the statement 'they are planting' into the

Kiswahili language 'wanapanda' so that the learners would understand the meaning. Burden (2000) argues that the use of the mother tongue assists the learner to relate some vocabulary and structures in English to their equivalents in their L1 thus learning the target language efficiently. The teacher used the Kiswahili language knowledge to describe different activities.

In addition, the mother tongue can be used to explain statements that are beyond learners' understanding like complex instructions. Kiswahili language was used during the English language lesson to explain instructions that were in a language beyond the level of learners' comprehension. The teacher used Kiswahili to discuss the instructions after realizing the learners might not get the correct answer. After the instructions were clear to the learners, they gave correct answers in Kiswahili language. Mwangi et al. (2009) argue that L1 may be used when instructions on a particular activity are given in a language that is beyond pupils' understanding.

Assessment of learners' understanding of concepts during a lesson is crucial in monitoring the progress. Teachers were observed to use oral assessments to find out what the learners already knew. In one of the lessons the teacher was introducing the noun 'bicycle' and learners could not directly relate the word with the object. It was only after being asked whether they knew 'bicycle' in Kiswahili language that the students responded to the question. In this situation, the learners knew the object in their mother tongue but they could not relate it to the word 'bicycle' In fact one learner affirmed that his father had a bicycle. It was observed that the learners' failure to give the correct response may not have been necessary because of a lack of information. This could have resulted from limited comprehension of the new words in the target language. It was possible to enhance learners' comprehension of the target language, by using learners' L1 knowledge.

Likewise, Willis (1998) argues that teachers may use L1 during the lesson to check learners' understanding of what they had read or discussed. In the study, the teachers were observed to use Kiswahili to find out whether they had understood a concept after a teacher had explained it. They would use the interrogative statement 'umeelewa' which is translated as 'Have you understood?' in English. The learners responded positively, confirming that they had understood the meaning of the word 'referee'. The positive response given by the learners is a sign that the use of the L1 had made learners understand the meaning of the word 'champion'. Jingxia (2010) adds that conveying the meaning of a foreign language through translation may help the learner feel natural in an EFL classroom. The natural feeling in class may have influenced learners' positive understanding of the words in the discussion.

Classroom management plays a crucial role in creating an effective and conducive learning environment where freedom and respect should be guarded. The teacher used Kiswahili to reprimand the learner who was misbehaving: 'Keti vizuri' which translates to 'Sit properly'. Celik (2008) and Lin (2013) argue that L1 is very useful in classroom management because instructions are given in a language that learners understand. Similarly, good classroom management ensures that classroom instruction time is used efficiently and effectively. It was noted that without using mother tongue the teacher was supposed to go through several steps like looking for describing, showing, or demonstrating a word as a way of bringing out the meaning. In one of the lessons the teacher used the equivalent word for the word 'respect' in Kiswahili 'heshima'. In doing so the teacher reduced the number of steps involved in learning vocabulary. Worth noting is that it may not be easy to demonstrate some words, like 'respect' in a multilingual class where respect is demonstrated differently depending on one's ethnic group. Thus, it was easier for a teacher to give the equivalent word in the learners' first language. Lin (2013) and Jingxia (2010) argue that the use of the target

language to explain the meaning of a word to learners may take more time than giving an equivalent in L1. The use of the mother tongue allows a teacher to take a shorter time when explaining the meaning of a word and still achieve the intended objective.

### Conclusion

Translanguaging provided teachers with a way of teaching English language concepts in ESL classes and also gave learners an avenue to express their thoughts. It is evident that teachers used L1 while explaining the meaning of words, paraphrasing sentences, and evaluating the understanding of concepts. Consequently, learners understood the concepts and improved their performance. There is need however, for clear guidance on the effective use of translanguaging practice.

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